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## Historic McMillin Bridge near Orting to be replaced

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The state Department of Transportation says the concrete McMillin Bridge outside Orting on state Route 162 is too narrow for traffic, rating it “functionally obsolete.”

That’s the same designation given the Interstate 5 bridge over the Skagit River that collapsed last week. A total of 118 bridges in Pierce County bear the same rating.

The state wants to build a new adjacent bridge over the Puyallup River next spring and tear down the old span.

“It doesn’t meet today’s standards,” said state project engineer Steve Fuchs, who said the state can’t afford to own and maintain the 78-year-old McMillin Bridge. “It’s definitely showing signs of fatigue.”

But like the Skagit River bridge, it is not bad enough to be rated “structurally deficient.”

After that, most of the similarities between the two bridges end.

For one thing, the McMillin Bridge has historical significance: With its concrete truss structure, officials say it’s the only one of its kind in the nation. And the state’s plans to knock it down have sparked opposition from preservationists.

Puyallup-area resident Bob Peters, a retired state Transportation Department employee, is working to save the bridge because of its unique design and heritage.

Peters wants it used as a wider crossing for the county’s Foothills Trail. The trail crosses the river about 50 feet away on an even narrower, old steel railroad bridge.

The 170-foot-long McMillin Bridge was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.

The Pierce County Council is expected to decide June 18 whether to put it on the county’s Register of Historic Places.

“Upon completion in 1935, the bridge was considered an engineering marvel,” says the county’s staff report. “The bridge was and is considered a true work of art that represents bridge engineering at its finest.”

But the county has declined DOT’s offer to take the bridge. County Executive Pat McCarthy said the county doesn’t want to inherit liability and maintenance.

“It’s a state responsibility, and the county is not interested in taking on a state responsibility,” McCarthy said.

The bridge is named for the unincorporated area of McMillin north of the crossing.

Traffic travels between the two large concrete trusses, which have no overhead supports. The bridge’s roadway is only 22 feet wide. It has no shoulders. It is so narrow that when two semitrailers pass each other, their mirrors often hit.

Three-foot wide sidewalks pass through the trusses on each side of the bridge. The wooden walkways vibrate from the impact of vehicles roaring by. The two-lane highway’s speed limit is 50 mph.

When driving across and a truck approaches, “You kind of want to inhale,” Peters said.

The tops of the trusses are covered with moss. "It needs a good cleaning," he said.

Peters agrees a new bridge is needed for vehicle traffic. But the collapse of the Skagit River bridge shows the value of having another bridge available in emergencies, he said.

"Saving this bridge has nothing to do with the building of the new bridge," said Peters, who worked on property leases for the Transportation Department until 2000.

The new bridge will cost \$15.5 million, including \$500,000 to tear down the McMillin Bridge. The project is fully funded by gas tax money.

The Transportation Department is waiting for approval of a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which would enable the state to build a new bridge and tear down the old one.

Fuchs said the concrete abutments on each side of the McMillin Bridge constrain the flow of the Puyallup River. The new bridge would have two spans: one over the river and another 110-foot section over land, protecting both the stream channel and the flood plain.

Those spans – and tearing down the McMillin Bridge – provide the potential for the river to meander in a larger stream channel, benefitting fish and the river, Fuchs said.

The Transportation Department doesn't want to continue owning and maintaining the bridge, Fuchs said.

"There's a huge financial responsibility and liability there," he said.

Fuchs said the bridge was last inspected in April, but that report hasn't been approved yet.

Prior to that, the bridge was inspected in 2011 and rated "functionally obsolete."

Fuchs said the bridge's concrete has shown signs of cracking, which was repaired. The bridge's walls were hit by vehicles in 2009 and 2011, also resulting in repairs. Nonetheless, the span is structurally sound, he said.

National bridge groups and the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation are among those that have voiced support for saving the bridge.

In January, Peters collected about 100 petition signatures outside the Orting Safeway, calling for the state and county to preserve the bridge as part of the Foothills Trail.

Orting Mayor Cheryl Temple said the city of 6,790 needs "something that will help the flow of traffic in and out of Orting."

But she'd also like to see the McMillin Bridge saved.

"It's worth preserving somehow," Temple said. "It's kind of sad. It's just a little piece of ourselves."

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